

Have We Been Misinterpreting the Word ‘Head’ in Ephesians 5?

The Greek word Paul uses for “head” in Ephesians 5:23 is *kephale*, which was commonly used to refer to the physical head on one’s shoulders. In fact, of the 59 times *kephale* is found in the New Testament, 44 times, it is used of someone’s literal, physical head.

The issue, then, concerns the meaning of *kephale* when it is used figuratively. Does it, as the English word “head,” refer to someone in charge, as in the “head” of General Motors?

That was the assumption until a landmark study by Dr. Berkley and Alvera Michlesen entitled “The Head of the Epistles” that was published in the Feb. 20, 1981 issue of *Christianity Today*. They examined and compared how the Jewish translators of the Greek Septuagint had translated *rosh*, the Hebrew word for “head,” into Greek. Their findings completely upended the traditional view and threw many traditionalists into disarray.

They discovered that when *rosh* was used literally to refer to someone’s physical head, they used *kephale*. When *rosh* was used figuratively to refer to the source or origin of something, they would again use *kephale*. However, they discovered that when *rosh* was used figuratively to refer to a person of authority, the Septuagint translators avoided *kephale* and used *archon* (ruler) or a similar word.

This shows that when Paul says in Ephesians 5:23 that the husband is the *kephale* of the wife, his point is not about authority and leadership. If he had wanted to establish an authoritarian structure for marriage, he could easily have done so by using words such as *archon* (ruler), *despot* (master) or *timÄ*” (one of rank and honor). Any of these would have

unambiguously communicated the idea of superior rank and authority.

Paul, instead, avoids those words and speaks of the husband as the *kephale*, or source of the wife. In doing so he is referring back to the Genesis account of creation where, instead of creating a separate creature from the ground to make the woman, God took a side from the person He had already created from the dust, and built the side into the woman. The popular Jewish commentary known as *The Chumash* says,

Unlike man's, the woman's body was not taken from the earth. God built one side of the man into woman—so that the single human being became two, thereby demonstrating irrefutably the equality of man and woman (Hyatt, *Paul, Women and Church*, 85).

This was important, for ancient, pagan teaching said that woman had been made from a different and inferior source than man, which became the basis for male superiority and female subservience. It also became the basis for homosexuality, for as Plato declared, "the truly noble soul is masculine and will therefore seek out another male as the object of its love," because they are alike and of the same substance.

Paul's use of *kephale* carried connotations of mutuality between the man and the woman and undermined the ancient argument for homosexuality. It also contributed to Paul's call for commitment and intimacy in the marriage relationship by highlighting the common origin of the sexes.

Commenting on the use of *kephale* in the New Testament, Dr. David Scholer, the late Professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, stated that the latest research "does not support the traditionalist or complementarian view of male headship and female submission." He goes on to say, "This data supports a new understanding in Christ by which men and women are viewed in a mutually supportive, submissive relationship." {eoa}

This article was derived from Dr. Eddie Hyatt's latest book, Paul, Women and Church, available from Amazon and his website at .

Dr. Eddie Hyatt *is an author, historian and biblical scholar. His books on church history, church order and spiritual awakening are available from Amazon and his website at .*